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You're the Boss



The Art of Running a Small Business

Why I Decided to Join Vistage

By [MP MUELLER](#)

As kids, when we used to wrestle and play around, we had an expression for when someone had you pinned, and you were in enough pain that you wanted to concede — you would yell, “calf rope!” The rodeo term is not one I have used in running my business. At least not until recently.

When I started my advertising business 17 years ago in Austin, Tex., I knew I needed to learn some things about running the business. A steady diet of self-help, business and motivational books taught me just enough, and my instincts took over from there. And then luck kicked in. We eventually grew to more than \$8 million a year in annual revenue. But the lingering effects of the recession left me scrambling a bit late last year when many of our clients cut their ad budgets for the second year in a row.

There was a time when I could check the bank account balance monthly, and things would always work out. Those days are over. More recently, whenever my staff looks to me for answers, I dance as fast as I can and try to make it look effortless, but the answers that come out often sound hollow. Gradually, I have accepted that I need some new financial tools. I have to start making better projections and paying attention to the right ratios. I need to get some advice on when to pull the trigger when hiring additional employees.

These thoughts had been building for some time, but something really clicked when, in an exit interview, a departing employee asked, “Why hasn’t this company grown more?” This person clearly had been expecting a bigger career arc here. And, it bothered me that we hadn’t managed to produce one. We have never expanded meteorically like other agencies. Of course, we have never had layoffs either, something that is very important to me. But why haven’t we grown more? I came to the conclusion that maybe I didn’t know what I didn’t know.

Yes, I was in need of some real time, real world advice. And while friends and family are wonderful and well-meaning, I have learned it’s best to stick to questions like, “How do you grill a turkey?” So, last fall, I began to think again about joining a [business group](#), the kind where you meet regularly with other owners and talk about what’s working and what isn’t.

I had been approached a few years ago to join [Vistage](#) by a client who belonged. I attended one session and decided it wasn’t a good fit or investment. At the time, the meetings seemed a bit too structured for me, and I didn’t really connect with the group chair. Three years, and a recession later, a guy who serves on a nonprofit board with me and whose business acumen I respect, encouraged me to meet with his Vistage group chair.

I was first vetted over drinks by a couple of the group's members, a tradition they use to conduct chemistry checks. The checks, I learned, are important in a group that reveals all to one another with a pledge of complete silence to the outside world (a pledge I will not violate in these posts). As we were leaving, these two personable, accomplished businessmen gave each other a hug and said, "I love you man." Somehow, as I contemplated becoming the only woman in a group of men, that openness reassured me. Of course, I was also impressed by a [2010 Dun & Bradstreet analysis \(pdf\)](#) that showed Vistage member companies in the United States had grown between 2005 and 2009 at an average annual rate of 5.8 percent while other D&B companies had declined at an average annual rate of 9.2 percent. Sign me up.

The concept of Vistage is to gather chief executives from complementary businesses into small groups. There is a group chair, usually a former chief executive who enjoys mentoring others, who organizes the monthly all-day meetings, and who also meets monthly with each member one-on-one for an hour and a half or so to offer individual coaching. When I first met our group chair, Bill LaRosa, a native New Yorker and a former global semiconductor executive who dresses Savile Row but with handmade, exotic leather cowboy boots, I was a little hesitant. Could my small business benefit from someone who had spent much of his time in huge corporations?

It turns out it could. Bill sees his business group as extended family, sincerely wants you to succeed and is truly on the leader board for smarts. For all of his corporate experience, his demeanor is closer to that of a counselor or therapist. He never tells you what to do; he leads you to a logical course of action through a series of smart questions. Recognizing that success is holistic, our one-on-one and group meetings always start with a numerical assessment — one for poor, five for great — of how each member is doing in three areas: health, personal and business. In our one-on-one sessions, we sometimes spend more time talking about family matters than business. And there's a release in that, too. Getting feedback on personal matters can free your mind to focus better on issues that affect your business more directly.

The fact that I am the only woman in this group has had its advantages. Much of my thinking and communications style is high-touch relationship centered. While this can be a strength, I also recognize it has shortcomings. I want to assimilate a more direct approach. At one point, the group asked how I felt about cursing. I responded with a sentence that included some four-letter evidence that I'm O.K. with it. It was a bonding moment.

Part of the appeal is the supportive honesty. While I encourage people at the agency to be honest with one another and with me, I know there's always a tendency to hold back a bit around bosses. It's been refreshing to have someone say, as Bill did, "I'm not going to accept that, MP. What is it I'm not understanding?" I think it was in response to my saying that I didn't know what to do about a certain business challenge. Deep down, of course, I really did know. But I needed someone to tell me that.

More on what I'm getting from my Vistage experience [in my next post](#).

MP Mueller is the founder of [Door Number 3](#), a boutique advertising agency in Austin, Tex. Follow Door Number 3 on [Facebook](#).